

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 5
SECTION 1

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Human rights reaches a low for Chile

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SANTIAGO, Chile—Marcela Pradenas Toro, an 18-year-old law student at the University of Chile, remembers the black-gloved hand that slammed into her stomach.

Alejandro Herrera, a 19-year-old who is studying theology, says he will never forget the cold steel knife as it traced a line across his throat.

Though their "detentions" lasted only a few hours, the memories linger.

The two students are among hundreds of Chileans who have encountered nameless men who move about in cars without license plates and who know intimate details of the private lives of those they seek.

Officials of human-rights organizations and clergymen are convinced that these nameless men are in Chile's intelligence services. And with the approval of President Augusto Pinochet, they say, these

men have carried out two years of torture and threats against government opponents.

"The human rights situation at this moment is the worst it has ever been in the last 12 years," said Andres Dominguez Vial, coordinator of Chile's Human Rights Commission, referring to the dozen years of Pinochet's military rule.

Dominguez and officials of a human-rights group sponsored by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Santiago, say the most sinister aspect of the situation is the government's regular use of extralegal means to intimidate its opponents.

The laws set up by the country's military junta enable the government to arrest and hold citizens without charge, to deport those suspected of antigovernment activities and to sentence people to internal exile in one of eight remote areas.

Though there are many similarities to the systematic violation of human rights in other countries, including neighboring Argentina

during the former military junta's 1976-79 campaign against opponents, the situation in Chile has several unique aspects, experts say.

For one, the number of people involved is quite small.

According to Human Rights Commission statistics, only 18 people are in internal exile. These include a former official of the commission, the vice president of the nation's construction workers union and the leader of a youth group.

Dominguez said his organization has 631 confirmed cases of "disappeared" people, who vanish without trace and are assumed to be in government custody or dead. By comparison, more than 9,000 people disappeared in Argentina's "dirty war" after the military takeover.

Human rights organizations say there are 1,000 political prisoners

in Chile, fewer than in some other Latin American countries.

However, the methods used here to suppress dissidents are almost identical to those used elsewhere.

Opposition groups and their members are spied upon. People identified as activists are followed; some are kidnaped and threatened or tortured.

The church's human-rights group recently compiled case histories on 31 people who were detained and tortured by unidentified men believed to be government agents.

The government has not responded. Officially, it says it has no knowledge of such activities.

But the diligent work of an appeals court judge has turned up substantial evidence of government intelligence agents' direct involvement in the kidnappings and murders of three members of the Chilean Communist Party.